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A CHRISTIAN MINISTER'S THOUGHTS ON THE HEALING OF A DISASTROUS SCHISM

PAPER READ AT THE SCHECHTER SOCIETY, CAMBRIDGE, FEBRUARY 19, 1909

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BY

THE REV. G. A. JOHNSTON ROSS, M.A.

CAMBRIDGE:
PRINTED AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1909

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A CHRISTIAN MINISTER'S THOUGHTS ON THE HEALING OF A DISASTROUS SCHISM.

I am grateful beyond all words, for the kindness of your invitation to come here to address you, and for the generous confidence which has given me *carte blanche* as to what I am to say.

Will you believe at once that it is my honest aim to prove worthy of that generous confidence, *at least* by refraining from saying any single word that could grieve or hurt anyone here? I should be fortunate indeed if in this matter I could come within measurable distance of the brilliant success of one of your members, who not long ago spoke to the undergraduates' society connected with my own Church, giving "a young Jew's impression of Jesus" without uttering a single word which the most sensitive Jew could construe as disloyalty to Judaism or the most sensitive Christian regard as irreverent. I cannot hope for a like success to-night, and I ask your indulgence in advance for any discourtesy which may inadvertently suggest itself in what I say.

For part of the pathos and difficulty of the situation to-day as between Jew and Christian is just that we know one another too little,—know, I mean, too little of one another's thoughts. It is a life-work for either to succeed in understanding the other. I have myself been unable to make Judaism the subject of careful study: I come to you to-night with little more equipment for speaking of the disastrous schism between Jew and Gentile than just this: that my heart *aches*, as a religious man, because of this schism. I feel that my brethren of Israel have something to give the world in the way of religion which I as a Gentile cannot give: that human progress is being hindered by our alienation. *And I think this ache for reunion is a terrestrial form of a craving at the heart of the living God.*

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I. I begin then with a confession of that attitude of mind to which one is shut up, as I think, by the results in many departments of knowledge to-day: the attitude of conviction that Humanity is one, although a unity manifold in its discreteness and diversity. Many of you know much better than I how the study of natural science,—of biology, of ethnology, of anthropology, of history,—has driven men to the conviction of the *unity* behind all the various forms of life, and specifically of human life. I am not sure that the significance of the interlacing of the various forms of life and the reality of their underlying unity is not the greatest truth which God has impressed on men during the last fifty years. I said this unity is felt to be manifold. It is true, there never has been a time in the history of the world when the spirit of *nationality* has been more marked in its activity. "The history of the modern world," says Dr Edward Caird, "has been the history of the growth of independent nations, each with its separate characteristics and its separate province of activity, each maintaining itself and pursuing its interests sometimes in cooperation with, sometimes in opposition to others." There is only one adjective in that sentence to which a fastidious critic might take exception. It is the word "independent." For although this differentiation of characteristics and of function among the races and nations of our time has become one of the most clearly defined and dominant ideas of the period, certainly no less marked has been the growing recognition of the fact that races and nationalities are not "independent" of one another, that the world is (as Mr Bryce has been reminding us) "already to all intents and purposes industrially and economically one": and the separate mission or function of each nationality must be regarded as contributing to what Dr Westcott was so fond of calling "the fulness of human life, the enrichment of that wonderful manifold unity which we call the life of humanity."

We must think of the race, then, as on the surface and for disciplinary purposes divided, but as fundamentally and ideally and in the eyes of God one.

II. Now this oneness of the race is ultimately oneness in God, the source and sustenance of its life. There is a close correlation between the ideas of the oneness of the race and the unity of God. "Without a belief in the oneness of humanity," said Mazzini, "religion is impossible": it is equally true that without religion, without monotheism, the race will never effectively realize the fact and significance of its own unity. That means that monotheism must be the final religion of men, if we believe that man is progressing toward a realized unity, and the ultimate religious debate must be (as of course at bottom it has always been) solely as to *what kind of God it is* who reigns.

These truths are, in the main, of modern recognition. In ancient times the idea of a humanity so united had scarcely dawned upon the human mind, I mean apart from the miraculous prevision of the Hebrew prophets. It is true that a Stoic writer before the beginning of the Christian Era recorded his dream of a time when "the world would become one harmonious flock feeding upon one common law": but the idea remained a philosopher's dream, and there is no evidence that it contained within itself any recognition of the rights of individual or of separate nationalities regarded as individuals. And in one writer, Celsus, the prevailing view is given with engaging frankness. "If anyone supposes," he says, "that it is possible that the inhabitants of Asia and Europe and Africa, Greeks and barbarians should agree to follow one law he is hopelessly ignorant. Each nation," he says elsewhere, "observes its national rites wherever they may happen to be. And this is advantageous, not only in so far as different people have conceived the idea of different institutions and men ought to keep what has been ratified for common use: but also, because in all probability, the different parts of the earth were originally assigned to different presiding powers, and distributed according to certain sovereignties and are so administered." That passage is particularly interesting as shewing how inaccessible to the ancient mind was the idea of wide difference of function as contributing to an underlying

unity; and also as shewing how the mind was unable to get further back than divided sovereignties, that is not only human but divine. The whole point of view is a confirmation of the truth that there is a close correlation between the unity of humanity and monotheism.

Even where one God alone was worshipped the *implicate of the recognition of His Aloneness in the unity of the race* was over wide areas not recognized, and to this day is of course very widely ignored.

I suppose that scholars are agreed that both in what are called Semitic and Aryan areas this "Henotheism" as it is called obtained. The illogicality of the position, the unreasonableness of the idea, was part of the burden of the great Hebrew prophets in the eighth century before the Christian Era, when the world power of Assyria became a reality to Hebrew politics and religion. These inspired men knew that a great moral choice lay before Israel, when that vast heathen area came into view. Was it or was it not to be claimed as God's area? If it were tacitly excluded from the field of His interests and activities, if Assyria were not (as Isaiah said) "the work of His hands" then monotheism was menaced: the Deity, the Lord who made the seven stars and Orion, was made to shrink to a Palestinian god, i.e. to the dimensions of a pagan deity. For the very idea of God is not complete without the correlated idea of the area He controls. If that area is circumscribed so is He: monotheism is at least otiose and ineffective unless the area over which God is thought of as presiding cover the whole universe, and the life upon it be regarded as His and as somehow a unity in Him.

I cannot but believe that one of the reasons why God is making the world to shrink as He is doing to-day, and causing the interdependence of its various parts to occupy so embarrassing a prominence in men's minds is, that He desires to put an end to this illogical position, to shew men that a divided race means for all who acquiesce in it a local departmental tribal God, and to release for all men, through the frank acceptance of their unity, the full forces of a beneficent monotheism.

III. Now Judaism is historically the guardian and steward of the truth of the sacred unity of God. I put out of mind for the moment both the oriental faiths and that amazing amalgam of truth and error, Islam. The headwaters of a monotheism ministering truly to human progress are in Judaism (should I rather say Mosaism?) and Judaism alone. It may surely be now set down as something beyond contradiction that the world will never accept any conception of God except one which proceeds along the lines drawn out (for example) in the preface to and the first four commandments of the Decalogue, where God is set forth as the providential deliverer from ill, as the Alone, as pure spirit inexpressible and indefinable by human effort, as holy, claiming man's reverence in utter truthfulness and in detachment of spirit,—or as in the later prophets whose sublime variations on the central theme that the Lord of conscience is the same with the Master of Nature and the Ruler of History constitute so marvellous a religious gift to mankind. It is Judaic monotheism alone that has shewed a capacity for expansion. "In spite of all impediments the knowledge of God given to Israel moved steadily forward" towards emancipation from national restrictions: and to-day it is Judaic monotheism that is leading the progress of mankind. It is in it alone that lies the secret of mastery over the growing complexity of life.

But all this means that it would be fatal to the work which Judaic monotheism has to do *if it were found allying itself with any practical acquiescence in a schism in humanity*, for then indeed it would go halting and impotent. I am not sure that there is not for monotheism to-day in this matter as great and crucial a crisis as that which confronted Israel in the days of Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Micah.

IV. If this then is the position of Judaism to-day, what is to be said of that other great religious force which is at the van of human progress, called Christianity?

Now Christianity is not a New Testament word: and I as a minister of the New Testament hold no brief for a

something in which there is room not only for sainthood but for devilry. I do not in the least know what that word Christianity connotes in your minds; for purposes of a conference of this sort it is not merely a useless symbol, the use of it is the direct and inevitable minister of misunderstanding.

Suppose for instance that I claim that Christianity is also like Judaism a guardian and trustee of monotheism, you are rightly shocked. You confront me with the appalling record of hagiolatry, Mariolatry, idolatry which Christianity contains: you go on to say that there has been a cultus not only of Mary but of Jesus which has been a disintegrant of monotheism, a blasphemous invasion of the sacred unity. And I not only do not deny it, but I view the fact with an indignation and a poignancy of regret which I think scarcely differs from the emotion in your own hearts.

And yet, I am sure that your historical studies and the detachment of your judgment, enable you to see that this is not the last word to be said about the contribution of the person and work of Jesus to the life of man. Let us set aside all this historic overgrowth, some of it slimy with the foulness of an unwashed but hastily baptized paganism, and go back to the work of the Israelite Jesus.

What Jesus taught was the monotheistic religion of His fathers, with emphases of His own which it may be had been forgotten. The teaching of the prophets on the Righteousness of Jehovah and on His exclusive claim to human homage He underscored: and He laid special emphasis on grace, on the Divine love, standing in this matter (as it has often seemed to me) in very direct succession to that wonderful preacher on the text that "God is love," the prophet Hosea. Arising out of His emphasis on the Divine love came a further emphasis on what is now so often called the immanence of God: on the truth which is the complement of the message of Isaiah, of God's exalted majesty—namely that, though Heaven is His throne and the earth His footstool, yet He will look toward the man of a poor and contrite spirit trembling at His word.

All this Jesus taught, and emphasized in His own person: and I find among the records of those who knew Him best, both in the first century and in the nineteenth and twentieth, not the remotest trace of a breach upon the sacred unity of God, but rather a religion which intensified the "zeal of God" which has been the historic gift of Israel....If I had time and knowledge, I would fain have tried to shew you how the message of Jesus to the world became (especially through its exploitation by Greek speculation) caricatured and made the propagator of polytheism and of racial hate: of a divided God,—a Godhead divided up as Olympus was among persons ethically contrasted, and of the conception of a race divided into covenanted and uncovenanted, privileged and unprivileged. But I pass over that, for which were I sponsor or to which did I serve myself heir, I could only appear here clothed with inexpressible shame: and I return to a simple testimony that the message of Jesus is itself monotheistic, and that so far as His message has ministered to human progress, stimulating scientific enquiry, and the conquest of nature, it has been by its emphasis on the enclosure of all life within the domain of one regnant mind, by saying in fact that God is love, and Law is the way He loves us.

V. Now, if Judaism and the message of Jesus possess this together, the treasure of monotheism in a form which has ministered to human progress, ought there not to be now (as happily we are beginning to see) some friendly and mutually solicitous regard passing between these co-trustees of the Divine grace?

With polytheism or whatever makes for the upbreak and degradation of the Sacred Unity, Judaism can have nothing to do; and believe me the true heart of Christian aspiration can have as little to do. But on the basis of a common gratitude for the gift of monotheism I believe that we are advancing toward a common conception of God: and that ultimately we shall draw near to one another on the things that constitute a basis for theology, a common agreement as to the meaning of the phrases "moral order" and "moral

universe," and therefore as to the true bases of worship and reconciliation with the Supreme. As I look round upon the world to-day, the hope that the religion of diverse races and nationalities shall ever be cast into the same mould in thought and dogmatic system seems to me ridiculous: but it does not seem to me at all so absurd to look for a general agreement in the conception of God, and in the ideal of character and life. "The end of the commandment is Love": the goal of the religious history of man is his realizing one disposition, attitude to and outlook upon life, and this will come through a common understanding as to the disposition and attitude to man of the heart of God.

And to this end I cannot imagine either Judaism or Christianity (I would rather call the latter Jesuism) failing to contribute: Judaism, because Hebrews still have that "zeal of God"—that genius for religion which marks them as the Messianic nation: and Christians because monotheism with the emphases of Jesus is in them as a fire in their bones, and they *must* proclaim it. I plead with my Jewish friends to have patience with the missionary spirit among Christian men even when it is directed in utterly mistaken ways against the loyal followers of their own faith. You cannot know the pain and distress that are at the heart of many devout and progressive Christian thinkers because of the disastrous methods and practices of many types of Christian conversionism, nor the shame that these practices cause us. The proselytising spirit always dogs the steps of the missionary spirit: and the desire to win a man over to one's own community (this ministry to the self love that always enters into a man's relation to his own community) follows like a shadow the noble desire to mediate to him the name and power of God. Christian missionaries have gone forth in their thousands, this noble desire overlaid by less noble aims, and by diverse superstitions, fanaticisms and prejudices. But it is ours to-day to disentangle from all this complex of belief and prejudice and conviction, the *honest* desire to mediate and share the blessings of a Divine message: with the history of that desire the greatest names both in Israel

and in Christendom are bound up.—An enormous amount of work has yet to be done before the two groups of God-driven men join their forces for the salvation of the world: but at least the time should be going past when we despair of a common understanding. You all remember Israel Zangwill's pathetic sonnet of the Meeting of Moses and Jesus.

MOSES AND JESUS.

In dream I saw two Jews that met by chance,
One old, stern-eyed, deep-browed, yet garlanded
With living light of love around his head,
The other young, with sweet seraphic glance.
Around went on the Town's satanic dance
Hunger a-piping while at heart he bled.
"Shalom Aleichem!" mournfully each said
Nor eyed the other straight but looked askance.

Sudden from Church outrolled an organ hymn,
From Synagogue a loudly chanted air,
Each with its Prophet's high acclaim instinct.
Then for the first time met their eyes, swift-linked
In one strange, silent, piteous gaze, and dim
With bitter tears of agonised despair.

Need its pessimism always be justified? I cannot believe it. God is not the God of the dead but of the living. Only the fringe of the powers that are latent in monotheism has as yet been released: and when the patience of scientific investigations into the origins of religion has had its perfect work, and the religious experiences of mankind have been more completely collated and studied, and when we have learned to know one another better, I believe that out of the unity of conviction then reached there will be generated a fire of missionary zeal, cleansed of the mephitic elements of proselytism, denationalization and the manufacture of the Meshummad and the rest, and when that fire has played awhile it will burn up the dross of race-hatred and misunderstanding. "Jehovah will turn to the peoples a pure message, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve him with one consent." (Zeph. iii. 9.) For the

promises of God will not be recalled: and his gifts and calling are without repentance. "Jehovah shall be king over all the earth; in that day shall Jehovah be one, and His name one." (Zech. xiv. 9.) To the bringing about of this end Israel *must* contribute: God's call to her to occupy a Messianic, mediatorial, priestly position as between God and the nations is irrevocable. Only I believe that in the work (though she be the elder sister in knowledge and in privilege) she will not be alone. Do you remember Isaiah's prophecy about the Gentile peoples of Egypt and Assyria? "In that day shall there be a highway of friendliness out of Egypt into Assyria, and the Assyrian shall visit Egypt and the Egyptian Assyria, and the Egyptians shall worship along with the Assyrians." (Isaiah xix. *ad fin.*) May we not read now into these verses any names that stand to us to-day as types of uncovenanted, if you like of heathen powers, and finish the passage thus:—"In that day Israel shall be third with (Egypt? let us say with Gentile Christendom) and with (Assyria? let us say with the awakening Orient), a blessing in the midst of the earth: whom the Lord of Hosts shall bless, saying, 'Blessed be Gentile Christendom my people and the Orient the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance.'"

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